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The Social Customs and Amusements in the Early Days
in the Red River Settlement and Rupert's Land.

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The Social Customs and Amusements of the Early Days in the Red River Settlement and Rupert's Land.

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Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen.

A short time ago during my absence from the City on holidays, a meeting of the Executive Council of the Historical Society was held, and at that meeting it was decided that among other papers that should be read during this present society year, there should be one by myself, and the subject was practically laid down on which I was to write. I, of course, was not there to enter a protest or to exercise my Presidential authority and rule the matter out of order. When I returned I found that protesting was of no avail as there seemed to be positive determination that I should do something for the Society that honored me on two occasions by electing me their President. I felt somewhat guilty of dereliction of duty and submitted meekly and with as much grace as I could.

The delicate subject selected for this paper is a wide one, and I trust that its incompleteness and shortcomings will be attributed to the unworthy hands in which it has been placed rather than to the subject itself.

It must be remembered here that as the population of the settlement was small there was no great diversity of amusements or of social functions in the Old Days, but such as they were they were plain and simple and to the mind of the writer particularly enjoyable.

In order to make a paper of any respectable length it will be necessary to digress from the text assigned me by my colleagues (I know I shall be pardoned by the clergymen present, as it is said that even they digress at times from their subjects.)

I will not here state how far back in the Red River days my own recollection goes, as it is not deemed necessary to state my age, but suffice it is to say that I well remember the "Good Old Days." One of my earliest recollections of festivities (and they were of such a boisterous character as to make a lasting impression on my mind) was the return of the Boatmen—as they were called—from York Factory. A short description of this interesting and at the same time very necessary personage may not be out of place, although most of you are familiar with the character, but few have seen him in his pristine glory.

The Boatman, Voyageur or Tripman, as he was variously called, belonged to that class of settlers who did not farm sufficiently to make them independent of the Hudson's Bay Co. or general merchant. The trips to York Factory were two in the year, known as the summer and fall trips. These were made for the purpose of bringing goods landed at York by the Hudson's Bay ships which brought cargoes of supplies for the interior, including the Red River.

These Boatmen were generally engaged during the winter preceding the voyage. If a man ran short of anything and had not the money wherewith to purchase, or something to exchange for the commodity required, he went to the Hudson's Bay Company's store or to some general merchant or freighter and got an advance and agreed to pay for same by going to York. He was then bound to be ready to start about the first of June. In a crew of eight men there was generally found one who furnished fun for the others or who, from some peculiarity, was made the butt of the party. There was generally a fiddle or two in the crowd and lots of men who could play it. I am told by a gentleman personally cognizant of the fact, that in one instance there was a boat's crew, where the fiddle was passed down from the steersman to the bowsman and every man in the boat could play it. It was said on these trips when a flat stone was found, it was at once utilized as a ball-room floor, and each man in turn "hoed it down" to the enlivening strains of the fiddle. When the different brigades met at York Factory and whilst waiting for their cargoes, I am told by gentlemen who have witnessed the scenes of boisterous hilarity and continued festivities that it simply (to use a purely original phrase) "beggars description."

Upon their return to the Red River and immediately upon unloading their boats, a goodly supply of the "ardent" was broached, and they proceeded to make "Rome howl." It was generally looked upon as a way (a little noisy, if you like) they had of celebrating a safe return from a more or less dangerous and perilous voyage.

In those early days people were "married and given in marriage," and I believe the custom prevails even in our

times of greater advancement and enlightenment; but oh! what a different affair a wedding in the old times was from one of the present day!

At the time of which I speak, a marriage license cost the large sum of thirty shillings (about \$7.50). As there were very few Rothschilds or Vanderbilts in the country then (although many have appeared on the scene lately, especially during the "boom") economy was practised, and the good old fashioned custom was resorted to of publishing the banns.

You will pardon me if I digress for a second. I used the words "thirty shillings" a moment ago, and they remind me of a story told me by that prince of genial and social old timers, the late lamented Hon. John Norquay. The incident which actually occurred, was this. In the early days the currency was pounds, shillings and pence, and when at the time of the transfer it was changed to dollars and cents, it was some time before the old settlers could master the new system. For instance, a certain woman was asked to sell a wavy, several of which her husband had just brought home, and she was offered fifty cents a piece for them. She indignantly rejected the offer, stating emphatically that she could not take less than one and six pence apiece for them, which sum of course was readily and cheerfully given to the intense happiness and delight of the worthy dame. The purchaser you will observe, was ahead a cool 12½ cents on each bird he bought. Now to return to the subject.

A wedding in the olden times in the Red River Settlement was not the tame affair of the present day. It did not consist in orange blossoms, ushers, a wedding breakfast, congratulatory speeches, the orthodox honeymoon trip. A wedding breakfast they certainly had, and several of them for that matter, and dinners and suppers galore. Where such an important event took place in the settlement the friends and relatives of both the high contracting parties were invited. The mode of invitation differed from the present style. Instead of sending out a card something like this "Mr. and Mrs. Smythe request the pleasure of your company at the marriage of their daughter Mary Araminta Jane to Mr. Fred. Augustus Horatio de Jones on Wednesday the 15th of February, 1893, at 12 o'clock, noon, at St. John's Cathedral" they adopted a surer way, especially considering the postal facilities of the times. The father of the bride generally went personally from house to

house and extended the invitation to those he wished to have. I am told that sometimes the bride and one of her bridesmaids did the inviting. This custom certainly did not obtain within our recollection.

The festivities generally commenced the day before the solemnization of the marriage (which usually took place on a Thursday). Eating, drinking, but principally dancing was the order. On the eventful day proper the happy couple drove to church, accompanied by a long procession of invited guests, in carriages and cutters, beautiful horses all bedecked with wedding flowers &c., and every "gallant" accompanied by a "partner." Sometimes, it is said, "partners" were scarce, and sometimes some young belle was not a little embarrassed by the importunities of her several admirers to accompany him to the church. She had, however, to make a choice, often weeks before the event, and although she must necessarily overwhelm several with disappointment and grief she might safely be trusted (as now) to choose the right one. I have a very distinct recollection of only succeeding in getting a "partner" for a wedding, (the last of the kind we attended) at Prince Albert, some years ago, after four or five unsuccessful attempts; and at that time when I was just about that age when I thought—well: that I was not a *very* bad looking fellow.

The return of the marriage party or procession was generally made the opportunity for the young men to give an exhibition of the speed of their horses (and they had splendid horses then) and the man with the slowest invariably brought up the rear at the finish. There was one invariable rule in these drives and that was that no one would dare pass the bridal party in the race, as to do so would be to commit a breach of etiquette which would neither be overlooked nor forgiven.

We have now arrived at the house of the bride's parents which was always used for the feast. The house of a neighbor was always cheerfully given up for the dancers (all unnecessary furniture—including beds sometimes—was bundled out, and now in very truth the fiat went forth "On with the dance, let joy be unconfined." These festivities have been known to go on with unabated vigor and joyous hilarity for three days and three nights. It is true they were rather hard on moccasins but people very often provided themselves with more than one pair, so that when one was worn out a new pair was ready. But the dance went

on until there was nothing but what was worn out except the floor, and sometimes there was very little of that left. Some may perhaps think that the moccasin part of this account is over drawn, but I can assure you seriously that I am, if anything under the mark. Of course you must understand that when I use the word "dancing" I mean "dancing;" not the dances of the modern days; oh no, instead of pianos and orchestras we had the good old fashioned fiddle, and always plenty of able and willing hands to play it. Instead of the effeminate, easy going and dreamy waltz, we had the always exciting and lively "Red River jig," which required not only skill to dance but lots of endurance as well; instead of the modern Cotillon and Quadrille we danced the ever reliable old Scotch Reel or Reel of Four, and instead of the somewhat lazy and languid Lancers we danced the ever popular and swingy old Eight hand Reel.

The next important step after the marriage festivities was the "Kirkling." On the Sunday immediately after the marriage the bride and bridegroom accompanied by the groomsmen and bridesmaids, drove to church, their horses still flying the many colored ribbons used on the wedding day, and the bridal party themselves all arrayed in their wedding habiliments. They all sat together and were of course the cynosure of all eyes in the church and it is pretty safe to opine that the clergyman would have to use considerable lung power and do a good deal of "desk pounding" to attract the eyes of his flock from this particular seat to himself; and I fancy that the dresses, bonnets &c. of the bride and bridesmaids would be the chief topic of conversations after church instead of the sermon. The bridal party all dined together that day at the house of the bride.

Now you may perhaps imagine that this would end the festivities, but not so. The bridegroom is still at his father-in-law's, and he must be brought back to the paternal roof, and the new daughter must be welcomed right royally. The day fixed for the groom to take home his bride (always to his father's house where he lived whilst preparing his own home) was Tuesday. It was now the turn of the parents of the groom. They invited, in the same way as before, all their relatives and friends to celebrate the arrival home of their daughter-in-law. It is now the same old story fiddle, "jig," feasting and making merry, generally till sunrise the following morning, when all go home,

put off their wedding garments, and go about their daily work as if they had been peacefully slumbering all night instead of passing a sleepless night, enjoy to the fullest the giddy dance.

During the winter months private parties were frequently given and as everybody knew everybody, they were much more enjoyable than some of the larger and more formal parties of the more recent times.

An "At Home," a "Five O'clock Tea," and the modern "Card Party," were unknown, as was also a "reception day." Instead of having some stated day in the week for receiving calls or *visits* as we called them, every day was a reception day. When one lady wished to visit another she simply went when it was convenient for her to do so, and always found the latch string on the outside of the door. She invariably found the lady on whom she was calling *at home*; if she was *not out*, but never found her *out* when she was *at home*. I was told by a lady a short time ago that the words "at home" had two meanings, one of which was "*not receiving*." I, of course, took her word for it and did not worry over looking through different lexicographies, to ascertain if the words really had two meanings.

Christmas Day in the Red River settlement was not very well observed, but New Year's Day was *the day* that was kept. It was a great day, a red letter day, in fact,—especially for the aborigines. Every Indian who had a flint lock gun would have it loaded up, and it was a very common thing for settlers to be disturbed about day light on the New Year's morning by a volley of musketry outside the door. This was the way that our dusky brothers ushered in the day that would be to them one of continual feasting.

After this preliminary the Indians would divide themselves into squads and start on their visits calling at every house on their way and getting something to eat at each place. If they could not eat all that was given them a receptacle was always convenient in which the remnants were stowed away to be discussed later on. The settlers always prepared beforehand for their numerous callers of this class. When a party of them entered the house the men shook hands all round. The squaws moreover were always determined not to be behind their pale sisters in keeping up the customs that prevailed, of kissing on New Year's day and insisted on kissing anybody and everybody. While I didn't object *seriously* to the

osculatory custom of the times I was always imbued with the idea that the process should be mutually agreeable to the participants, and for that reason I was impelled—however rude it may have been—to make a hasty exit through the front door as our dusky lady friends came in by the back, in order to avoid the terrible ordeal.

In the summer people were generally too busy to devote much time to amusements and pleasure. The gun and fishing rod were the principal means of sport. We used to play a game we called "Bat," which was practically the same as baseball, only we had no "leagues," no "professionals," and no "gambling." We had no croquet or lawn tennis, although we used to wear a negligé costume such as tennis players now affect, shirt and trousers, and I am sure that we wore it for the same reason that the tennis player does—to keep cool in. The one however was to *play* in, the other to *work* in.

The 24th of May was always a great day in those old Red River times. People would gather at Fort Garry from Lake Winnipeg to Portage la Prairie and as far up the Red River as Pembina and St. Joe across the line. We had no military manoeuvres but horse racing was the whole sport. We have on many occasions ridden races from the Fort down what is now Main Street, but was then only a trail, to about where we are now standing.

There was very keen competition in the different events, and every race was run on its merits—the best horse invariably winning the race. There was very little gambling on the events and pool selling was unknown. Neither was there any "jockeying," "pulling horses," or "selling races." There was always much satisfaction among those who took an interest in horse races to know that, if their favorite did not win he was at least fairly beaten.

We knew nothing about Dominion Day, but I can well remember that when the 4th of July was celebrated by our American friends, then resident in Winnipeg, the proper salute was fired and the day generally observed with horse racing and other sports.

A few days ago I came across a short poem written by the Hon. Harvey Rice, an old gentleman in his 81st year, and sung at the first annual convention of the early settlers association of Cuyahoga County, Cleveland, O. The poem seems to me to be very appropriate to the conditions of the people in this country in the good old days.

Give me the good old days again
When hearts were true and manners plain
When boys were boys till fully grown,
And baby belles were never known;
When doctors' bills were light and few,
And lawyers had not much to do;
When honest toil was well repaid,
And theft had not become a trade.

Give me the good old days again
When only healthy meat was slain;
When flour was pure and milk was sweet,
And sausages were fit to eat;
When children early went to bed
And ate no sugar on their bread;
When lard was not turned into butter,
And tradesmen only truth could utter.

Give us the good old days again,
When women were not proud and vain;
When fashion did not sense out-run
And tailors had no need to dun;
When wealthy parents were not fools,
And common sense was taught in schools;
When hearts were warm and friends were true,
And Satan had not much to do.

THE HONORABLE HUDSON'S BAY CO.

This paper would be far from complete if something were not said of the social customs of officers and people generally connected with the Hon. Hudson's Bay Co.

Sometimes, it is said, that the affix "honorable" is to the name of some person whose moral character would not entitle him to it, but the experience of the old settlers in their dealings with this Company, would justify the term Hon. Hudson's Bay Co. in every sense of the word. Possibly no individual company or corporation had greater opportunities for imposing on the credulity and ignorance (of business matters) of the unsophisticated aborigines of this country as had this gigantic Hudson's Bay Co., whose forts, posts and establishments were in every conceivable part from Labrador to the North Pole. The company was generally fortunate and wise in the selection of its officers and employees. Young gentlemen sent out from the old country and some selected from among the natives of the country, were gentlemen in every sense of the word. They nearly all started at the foot of the Hudson's Bay ladder and were generally young men of education and culture, and many of them of more than ordinary attainments—young men whose early home training was moulded on principles of morality, honesty and probity. These

gentlemen, beginning, as I have already said, at the foot of the ladder, became in after years, (some of them many years of devoted service) prominent in the administration of the affairs of the company. By fair and honest dealings with the Indians and natives they certainly won their gratitude, esteem and confidence. I am indebted to a gentleman who lived for some years at York Factory, for a description of the life at that place, and to another gentleman who resided several years in the far north for the happenings in the icy regions. Both those gentlemen were connected with the Hudson's Bay Co., but with that native modesty, characteristic of the officers of the Company, they would not allow their names to be mentioned.

With reference to the social customs of officers who were from time to time stationed at the Upper and Lower Forts it may be said that they always joined with the old settlers in their pleasures and amusements, and were always welcome guests at parties, weddings &c. given by the settlers, and it is needless to say that with that unbounded and royal hospitality for which the officers of the company were noted, they were not slow to reciprocate the attentions skewn to them by the old settlers. When the officers set themselves out to entertain they did it in magnificent and princely style, regardless of expense, and those who were fortunate enough to be invited to one of their parties at either of the Forts were always treated with an unbounded hospitality. They never did anything by halves.

LIFE AT YORK FACTORY.

New Year's day at York, as it was at all other posts, was *the* day of the year, and was celebrated with much ceremony. At 5 o'clock in the morning the clerks and staff would be called by the steward to meet the officer in charge in the mess-room which was generally in the residence of the "bourgeois" and then after hand-shakings, compliments and greetings, refreshments were served. After partaking of the good things they retired. After them came in the tradesmen to exchange greetings with the officer in charge. They then gave place to the laborers, in number about 40, who called and also received the hospitality of the Chief Officer. After these came the women and children of the Fort and they in turn were treated to a supply of cake, dried fruit &c., and they went on their way rejoicing.

It was now the Indians' turn. They

generally congregated about the Fort at New Year's to participate in the good things that were going about that time. They were invariably well treated, and if not identical with their white brethren they were fully as pleased and satisfied with their kind reception.

On New Year's evening the officers in charge of the Factory gave a grand dinner and ball. To the latter all the employees of the company were invited, the best of good fellowship prevailed and dancing was kept up until morning. The custom of giving this annual ball was not only kept up at York but at every post in the country, from the remotest station on the Labrador coast to the great Yukon in the Arctic Circle.

Another great event of the year was the arrival of the Hudson's Bay ship at York Factory which occurred about the 20th August and brought all the supplies for the year. This was an event of great rejoicing and was announced by the firing of six big guns. This ship brought one of the two packets received during the year from the outside world. The excitement of opening and reading letters from over the sea was intense; some letters bringing tidings of joy and some of sorrow; some telling of continued health and happiness of friends, and others that some dear relative or friend had gone over to the great majority. Perhaps none were more anxious for the tidings brought over by the great ship than the pioneer missionary and his wife, for not only were they anxious over the arrival of their few supplies of luxuries from friends at home but what news would it bring them from their dear children whom they had to send home to be educated. One can easily imagine how eagerly every word of their semi-annual letters would be devoured, and what happiness good tidings of their dear ones would bring to this self-sacrificing and devoted missionary and his brave wife. All honor, we say, to the devotion of these missionaries to their Master's work, to the men who would sever family ties and associations of their youth to brave the hardships and perils of pioneer missionary work in the frozen regions of an uncivilized country.

The men not engaged in unloading and storing the goods from the ship occupied their time in exchanging news or admiring the nice things brought out for them.

All this time the brigades from the interior were camped along the river bank, and kept up a continuous round of festivities, until their cargoes were delivered.

ed to them, and the sturdy tripmen once more got down to their hard work and commenced their homeward voyage to the Saskatchewan or Red River as the case might be. The arrival home of these boats with their precious cargoes was not only a time of great rejoicing among the voyageurs, as we have already shewn, but it was a great event in the settlement. Everybody knew that a quantity of nice goods had arrived for the Hudson's Bay Co. and the few general merchants, then doing business, and everyone was anxious to have a share of the good things before they were all gone, as the supplies were limited—decidedly limited if compared with the stocks now imported by the average merchant. It is true our wants were not so great or so many as now, but we were just as anxious to get the best that was going then as are the people of more recent times. The fashions were not then quite so fickle or changeable, and I was going to say not quite so absurd or ridiculous in many instances, but on second and calmer thoughts I will not draw a comparison, as it might not be in favor of the more modern styles, and I have grave fears that I might incur the severe displeasure of some of the fair sex and bring down the wrath of others on my devoted head. But I think I hear some of them saying "What do men know about fashions, anyway?" We meekly say "Nothing!": they are past finding out and away and beyond the comprehension of the average man.

In the Hudson's Bay posts in the far north there was always an air of excitement in the community, including the Indians, a few days before New Year's, as the Indians began to congregate at the Fort, knowing that they would be participants in the festivities of the season.

On New Year's morning, often before daylight, the officers' quarters are visited by all the employes of the company and by the Indians, all supplied with guns of every description. At a given signal volley after volley was fired until the officer made his appearance: after hand shaking and exchange of greetings refreshments were served in the shape of tea, coffee and cake.

At some posts it was customary for the officer in charge, his clerks and employes, each with a train of dogs, if possible, to go for a drive. They generally started quietly but on the return when everyone was endeavoring to get the lead the excitement was so intense that all regard or respect of superiors was forgotten, and each one with his whip cracking

and yells to encourage the dogs, would strive for first place.

All previous records of a first class dog fight were climaxed by the spectacle that was presented sometimes, when some 75 or 100 dogs got into an entangled scuffle.

A grand dinner and ball was given by the officers in charge in the "Big House" and everybody enjoyed themselves till morning.

In the winter months in the north the days were so short that most of the amusements were indoors, although some of the keener sportsmen indulged in the chase. When card playing became monotonous a little concert was got up and a pleasant hour was spent singing the good old songs.

As an instance of the wonderful adaptability of man to his surroundings at Fort Simpson and Fort Chippewyan billiard tables were made; the legs and top were of spruce, the latter thoroughly levelled with a spirit level. The cushions and balls were of course imported. The cues were of birch and the tips of old tan leather carrying straps and stuck on with glue. I am told that these tables compared very favorably with those now in use.

It may be surprising that in a country so isolated there should be found a good library but such there was at Fort Simpson, the centre of the Great McKenzie district. This library was formed by subscription from the officers and men and by donations of books from the Hudson's Bay officers well known in the country. In the autumn of each year the officer in charge of the different posts gets a supply of books which are returned the following year and a fresh supply is obtained. This library was a great boon and was very much appreciated.

To attempt to describe the hardships, difficulties and many privations, even to starvation itself, endured by the devoted officers and men of the Hudson's Bay Co., in this unsettled land of wonderful distances would only result in failure. Their dangerous summer voyages and the indescribable hardships of their long winter trips on snowshoes, with their dog trains, sleeping out in the snow, with nothing but the canopy of heaven for a roof, with very scanty bedding and often not enough food to satisfy the cravings of their appetites we have often heard about but we cannot describe. The indomitable courage and unflinching pluck of these men is well known. In the midst of greatest trials, even death, almost certain death staring them in the face, they would invariably rise to the occasion

and successfully combat and overcome the many difficulties in their path. They were *grit* right through and were not made of the stuff that would sit down and mope or indulge in useless repinings under difficulties and privations.

It often seemed to me wonderful how cheerful, contented and happy these men could be in their isolated condition, their long distances from relatives and friends, from whom they can only hear perhaps one a year. Many of these Hudson's Bay gentlemen, having been accustomed to the best society in the civilized centres of the Old World, yet we hear of them quite contented in their solitary posts, often with only dogs and savages for their companions and sometimes entirely alone in the snow-clad regions of the far north.

I well remember meeting one of the Hudson's Bay officers on his return after years of absence from an extended furlough on a visit to relatives and friends in England, some of whom he had not seen for over 25 years. I said to him "Mr. ———, I am surprised that after tasting once again the sweets of civilization after a lifetime of banishment and isolation, that you did not remain in England and spend the rest of your days in peace and comfort and plenty, instead of returning to again endure the privations and hardships of life in the frozen north." He looked at me in surprise and said "My dear fellow, in England I'm a very small toad in a very large puddle: in my district in the north I'm absolute monarch."

Your patience must be now fully exhausted and I will not further try it, but will conclude by reading a short poem written by Wm. Gerrond Esq., lately of High Bluff, but now of Prince Albert. Mr. Gerrond was Bard of the Portage la Prairie St. Andrew's Society and was always ready with a poem to read on St. Andrew's Day. Many of his efforts were of very considerable merit, and when he expressed the ideas of an old settler in poetry, on the old and new order of things in this country he certainly did it well.

Before reading the poem I may explain that there are perhaps some present who will not understand that the words "me whatever" which occur three times in the poem, was and is yet, a very common expression amongst the natives of this

country, and they really mean, "for my part." For instance instead of saying "For my part I'm going to the Fort," one would say, "Mr. Whatever," I'm going to the Fort. With this explanation I will give you the poem.

WHAT WAS AND IS: AN OLD SETTLER'S IDEA.

O for the times that some despise,
At least I liked them, me whatever,
Before the Transfer made wise
Or politics had made us clever

Then faith and friendship, hand in hand,
A kindly tale to all were telling,
From east to west, throughout the land,
Contentment reigned in every dwelling.

'Twas then we all in corduroys
Would travel to the church on Sunday
And listen to the good man's voice,
And do as he had said on Monday.

Our women too, both wife and maid,
Had lovely tresses for a bonnet,
A goodly shawl upon the head
Was all she ever put upon it.

Then gold was scarce, twas very true,
But then it was not much we wanted,
Our artificial wants were few,
And we were happy and contented.

But now alas the times are changed,
At least I think so, "me whatever,"
And artificial wants are ranged,
And piled in heaps along the River.

Our women's thrown away the shawl,
And got instead a showy bonnet
With many a costly falderall
Of feathers, silk and lace upon it.

Our men despising corduroys
In broadcloth grace the church on Sunday
And then go home to criticize
And do as they've a mind on Monday,

Our good old Faith's supplied with doubt
And friendship killed by speculation;
And sweet content is driven out
And grumbling envy fills her station.

O for the times that some despise,
At least I liked them, me whatever,
Before the Transfer made us wise
And politics had made us clever.